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By Dan Robinson

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has called on the world to demand that the Burmese military government end its crackdown on dissidents, including Buddhist monks, in the wake of nationwide democracy demonstrations more than two months ago. VOA's Dan Robinson reports, the commission held an unusual public hearing on Capitol Hill to re-focus attention on the situation in Burma.

Coinciding with a brief resumption of legislative activity by the U.S. Congress, four members of the commission presided over the hearing to assess the current situation in Burma.

Commission vice chairman Richard Land says many questions remain about the full scope of the crackdown and what he calls the brutality of Burma's military. He refers to reports suggesting that the abuse of protesters was more brutal than initially described and that there were more fatalities, torture and arrests than reported.

Medical workers help a monk injured in clashes in Rangoon 26 Sep. 2007 (MoeMaka Media photo)

"The military's bloody response to the demonstrations was a setback. But if we have learned anything from recent history we know that freedom trumps tyranny," said Land. "As Burma's elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi has eloquently stated, "We will prevail because our cause is right, because our cause is just. History is in our side. Time is on our side." But I am also reminded of another quote, this one from Dr. Martin Luther King, who wrote in 1963 that "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressors. It must be demanded by the oppressed."

In recorded video testimony from Mae Sot, on the Thai-Burma border, one 23-year-old Burmese monk Ashin Kavida, described a scene of confusion and violence in September as Burmese troops began rounding up monks at Rangoon's Shwedagon Pagoda.

Among seven witnesses appearing in person was Ashin Nayaka, a leading member of the International Burmese Monks Organization, and a visiting scholar at Columbia University's Department of History in New York City. He says that in their actions, Burma's military rulers launched an assault on the integrity of the country's Buddhist spiritual life, and asserts that if tensions are not addressed they will lead to further bloody confrontation.

"Our spiritual obligation is to freedom, not to silence or submission. Today, we know that several leading Buddhist monks in Burma are still on the run. We do not know with any accuracy how many monks have been killed, how many were forcibly disrobed," said Nayaka. "We do not know how many monks are in prison. We do not know how many monks have been taken to secret locations. What we know is there is a terrible secrecy and silence over Burma."

Paul Rush, a journalist whose video footage of Burmese troops in Rangoon shooting and killing a Japanese journalist was widely seen around the world suggests Burma's military is likely continuing a brutal crackdown.

"The Burmese people, which includes the country's badly-persecuted ethnic minorities need the help of the international community, to shed this yoke of a half a century of oppression by a minority of murderous military elite. That I presume is why this hearing is taking place today [and] is why the international community is still listening," said Rush. "The Burmese people want democracy. They yearn for democracy. It is why I join with you all to reveal the tremendous reservoirs of light struggling beneath a darkness, the darkness of a tiny and unconscionable minority.

Aung Din, Executive Director of the U.S. Campaign for Burma, estimates that more than 5,000 people including 2,000 Buddhist monks were arrested, in contrast to lower figures provided by the military, and says that 700 Buddhist monks remain in detention.

He repeats a call on the United States, U.S. Congress, European Union and others to

maintain pressure on behalf of people in Burma, saying this would also help persuade Burma's neighbors in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and pave the way for stronger action by the United Nations:

“We are seeking a policy shift among governments of China, India and ASEAN on Burma, as the U.S. has increased its diplomatic effort to organize these countries to take a more responsible stance,” he said. “We want the U.S. government to maintain the U.N. Security Council as the venue to discuss the situation in Burma, and double its diplomatic effort in organizing these countries to be able to have a collective voice and take effective action on Burma, beginning with a binding resolution from the U.N. Security Council, which will effectively impose an arms embargo.”

Despite efforts by U.N. special envoy Ibrahim Gambari, human rights attorney and Council on Foreign Relations member Jared Genser asserts Burma's military has taken no steps toward democratization.

Genser predicts that China, the largest arms supplier to Burma, will continue to try to strike what he calls a balance between its desire to be viewed as a responsible actor in diplomatic efforts, and a need to secure its own interests in Burma.

Without firm action by the U.N. Security Council, Genser suggests there will be little change in the military's attitude.

“It is unlikely that the Burmese junta will feel compelled to do anything meaningful until the Security Council is able to agree on a way forward. This will of course be an uphill struggle, given China and Russia's seat at the table,” said Genser. “But the U.S. and other countries can apply pressure on the U.N. and Security Council members to adhere to Mr. Gambari's comment that the U.N. “wants time-bound, concrete and serious results.” In the meantime further sanctions should be applied wherever possible to increase pressure on the regime.

A former National Security Council official and now professor at Georgetown University, Michael Green, says while there have been some positive developments, including high profile attention from the Bush administration, some strong statements from ASEAN, and what he calls

small but unprecedented steps by China, there has also been substantial inertia [lethargy or inaction] by the international community.

Burmese activist holds a picture of opposition party leader Aung San Suu Kyi outside the Burmese embassy in Bangkok, 02 Sep 2007

"Mr. Gambari has certainly done better than any of us his predecessors in getting access to Aung San Suu Kyi and keeping some process going. However, many of these are tactical," Green said. "They are unprecedented but not huge and many of them reinforce process without results and I think the problem we face in terms of international work on this situation is that we could easily slip into process for process' sake."

Specifically, Green says China and India may be tempted to accept limited results, while he asserts that the United Nations continues to pursue what he calls a lowest common denominator approach. ASEAN, he asserts, is going backwards in its role perhaps because of pressure from Burma's military on what he calls like-minded members.

The hearing of the Commission on International Religious Freedom comes as Congress began an intense two week period in which lawmakers must approve a range of important funding and policy legislation.

However, among bills not yet acted upon are Senate and House measures supporting democracy efforts in Burma, demanding the release of political prisoners, Buddhist monks, and democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and targeting Burmese military profits from sales of gems in the U.S. using third countries.

It's not yet clear whether lawmakers will press to consider and pass these before the end the current congressional session, or if they will have to wait until the new year.